



Sex and Social Interaction During COVID-19: What Are You Doing to Stay Safe?

Senior Project

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By

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major topic since January 2020, individuals are still susceptible to the virus and hybrid schooling has officially started back. Taking this into consideration it is extremely important to ensure that college students are staying safe and protected when socially interacting with others. The purpose of this study is to determine what precautions undergraduate college students are taking when meeting up with people, whether it be friends or strangers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pondering upon this and through personal observation brings about the question of “How has COVID-19 affected sexual and social interaction among college students and what precautions might they be taking to stay safe?”. In March of 2020 the world health organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Many measures have been implemented to keep individuals safe from transmitting the disease such as, wearing masks and social distancing (National Coalition of STD Directors and NASTAD, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). Results from students indicated that there is a need for education about these measures, as the results reflected that many students were not taking any precautions while engaging intimately with others during the pandemic.

Sex and Social Interaction During COVID-19: What Are You Doing to Stay Safe?

The 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has been a major topic since January 2020, individuals are still susceptible to the virus and hybrid schooling has officially started back. Taking this into consideration it is extremely important to ensure that college students are staying safe and protected when socially interacting with others. The purpose of this study is to determine what precautions undergraduate college students are taking when meeting up with people, whether it be friends or strangers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Personal observation and discussion with my peers regarding sex and social interaction during COVID-19 provided anecdotal data that suggests that students may need education regarding how to stay safe during sexual and social interactions during COVID-19. In personal observation among college students it was observed that my peers were meeting strangers through the use of social media and dating apps to engage in sexual activity (H. Wrenn, personal communication, February 16, 2021). This observation sparked the following research question: How has COVID-19 affected sexual and social interaction among college students and what precautions might they be taking to stay safe?

Literature Review

Sexual Behaviors and 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19)

In March of 2020 the world health organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Many measures have been implemented to keep individuals safe from transmitting the disease such as, wearing masks and social distancing (National Coalition of STD Directors and

NASTAD, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). How does this effect sexual interaction and sexual activity among college age students?

Sex is a fundamental part of an individual's wellbeing, it is erroneous to think that college students or even individuals in general will not engage in sexual activities during a pandemic (Alpalhão & Filipe, 2020). However, upon review of research, sexual activity has been discouraged and decreased as a result of COVID-19, in the general public (Firkey et al., 2021; Jacob et al., 2020; Lopes et al., 2020; National Coalition of STD Directors and NASTAD, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). Jacob et al., (2020), was the first to research sexual activity during COVID-19 in the United Kingdom, the study included around 850 individuals, between the ages of 25 to 34, around 40% of young, married, males reporting having sex at least once a week in comparison to others whose sexual activity had decreased. Nevertheless, there seems to be less research conducted on the effect of COVID-19 on sexual behaviors specifically in college students (Firkey et al., 2021). In modern times, technology, namely dating apps such as, Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge are used for dating and sexual encounters, which can pose a risk of COVID-19 transmission if the proper precautions are not taken. In personal observation among college student's the majority use dating apps and when asked why, these students would respond "I'm trying to get laid (have sex)" (H. Wrenn, personal communication, February 16, 2021). Research has shown that use of these dating apps has either risen or stayed the same despite the pandemic (Alpalhão & Filipe, 2020; Firkey et al., 2021; Jacob et al., 2020; Lopes et al., 2020). Since these dating apps are typically used for casual sex, it is important to be aware of the guidelines for lessening the risk of

transmitting COVID-19 by avoiding kissing, having both individuals wear a face mask, and using condoms to avoid contact with body fluids (Jacob et al., 2020; National Coalition of STD Directors and NASTAD, 2020).

The proposed study is warranted to determine sexual and social practices of undergraduate college students during COVID-19. Students may be unaware of the guidelines set forth by the CDC, National Coalition of STD Director and/or World Health Organization that discourage kissing and casual sex encounters (National Coalition of STD Directors and NASTAD, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020) . Based on survey data analysis, educational materials such as a public service announcement or brochure may need to be developed for distribution to students.

Methods and Materials

A convenience sample, ranging from ages 18 to 57, was conducted on one university in southeastern North Carolina. A confidential survey was drafted using Qualtrics to survey undergraduate students regarding their sexual and social interactions during COVID-19 and precautions they were taking to stay safe. The survey was sent out by the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs on May 6th, 2021. Inclusion criteria for the study required the participant to be 18 or older and an undergraduate student. Exclusion criteria included being younger than 18, being a graduate student, being a staff member taking college classes, and/or being a faculty member taking college classes. A total of 90 subjects participated however, due to exclusion criteria seven were excluded from the study. Of the 83 undergraduate college students surveyed 76.67% were female, 17.78% male, 4.44% nonbinary/third gender, 1.11% preferred not to answer. The racial profile of

participants were 10% “American Indian, 18.89% African American, 61.11% White, 8.89% did not list, and 1.11% preferred not to answer. A descriptive design was used to obtain data regarding sexual behaviors during COVID-19 and what precautions college students were taking. According to Fain (2017), “descriptive research uses questionnaires, surveys, interviews, or observations to collect data” (p. 25), descriptive design is described as gathering “information about conditions, attitudes, or characteristics of individuals or groups of individuals. The purpose of descriptive research is to describe the meaning of existing phenomena” (Fain, 2017, p.168).

Participants were asked 24 questions regarding relationship status, dating habits, questions surrounding intimacy, and precautions taken to stay safe during the pandemic. A recruitment letter was sent out to undergraduate students containing the contact information for the private investigator and the faculty advisor. The participants were informed that the survey was 100% voluntary and risks associated may include breach of confidentiality, feelings of embarrassment, or emotional stress. The participants were informed that all efforts would be made to reduce any risk associated while taking the survey. Information was given to participants regarding data collected informing them that this data would be maintained in a password protected environment. The survey was open and data was collected from May 6th 2021 to May 13th, 2021. To analyze the researchers used descriptive statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics is defined as, “statistics that describe, organize, and summarize data” (Fain, 2017, p. 264).

Results

The results of the study showed that 60% of the results came from Juniors and Seniors and 51.72% of participants were commuter students with the rest living in on or off campus housing. The survey inquired about the precautions individuals took before meeting up with their friends, the results showed that 38.03% of individuals wear a mask before meeting with friends, 19.72% ask if their friends are having COVID-19 symptoms, 7.75% ask if their friends have been tested for COVID-19, 21.72% ask if their friends have had the COVID-19 vaccine, and 19.72% do not take any precautions.

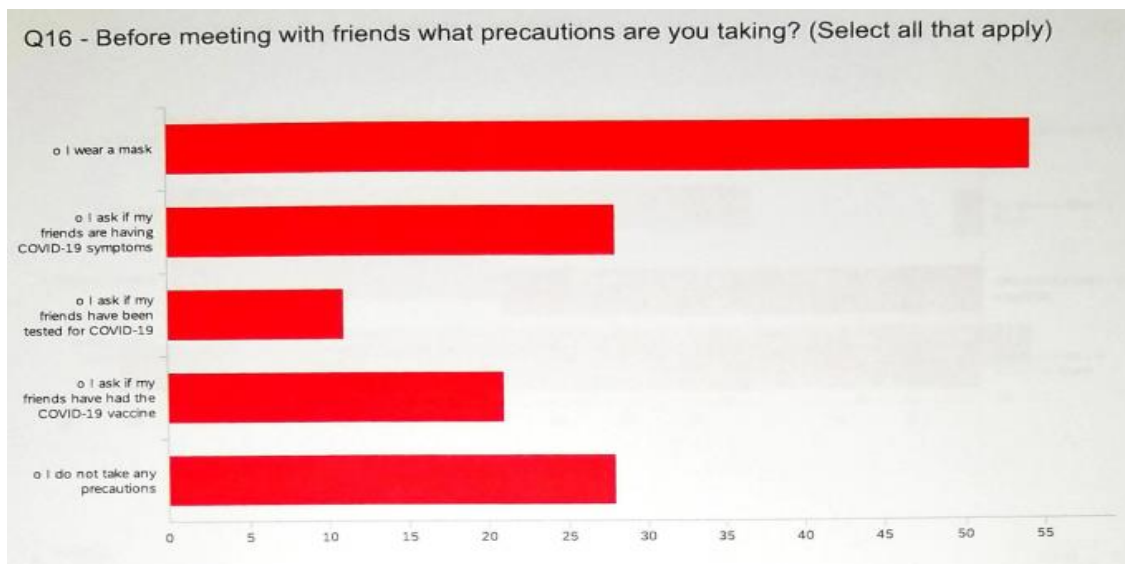


Figure 1. Graph presenting precautions participants took before meeting with friends.

When asked about relationship status participants rated their status as (Single 28.89%, Married 23.33%, Currently dating 13.33%, Committed relationship 34.44%). 21.31% used a dating site or app to meet partner. Within the past 30 days 67.82% of participants reported they had engaged intimately with someone. Once prompted about if precautions taken before engaging intimately, 67.47% of the participants reported not taking any precautions before engaging intimately

(kissing, making out, oral, vaginal, or anal sex) with someone.

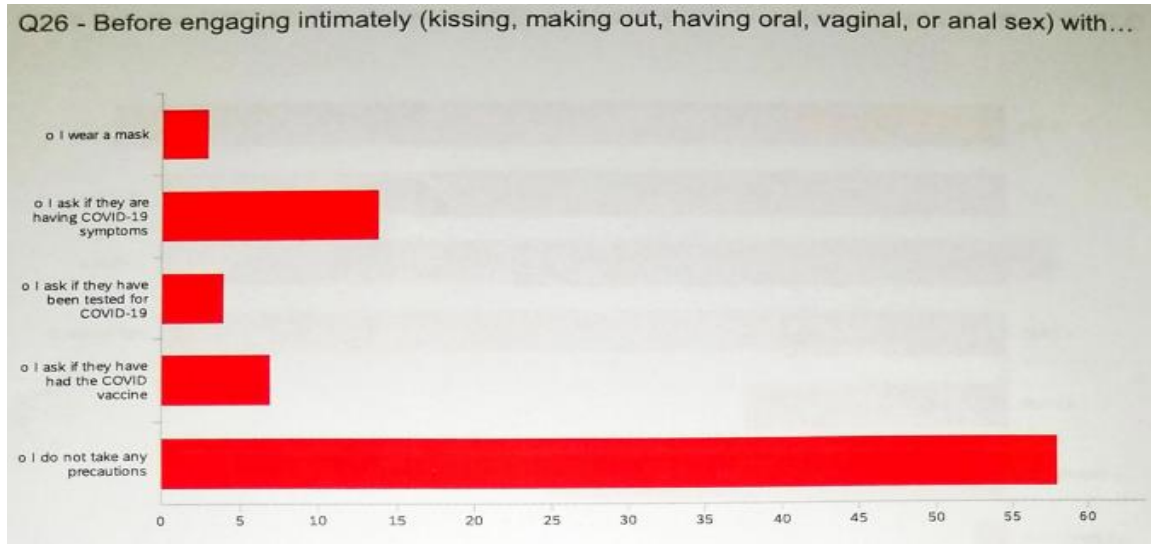


Figure 2. Graph presenting precautions participants take before engaging intimately with someone

When asked about attendance of informal gatherings, 64.45% of participants were unlikely to attend informal gatherings since March 2020. Forty percent of participants reported they do not wear a mask when attending events. Sixty-eight point eight nine percent of participants were unlikely to interact intimately (kissing, making out, oral, vaginal, or anal sex) with someone from an informal gathering since March 2020.

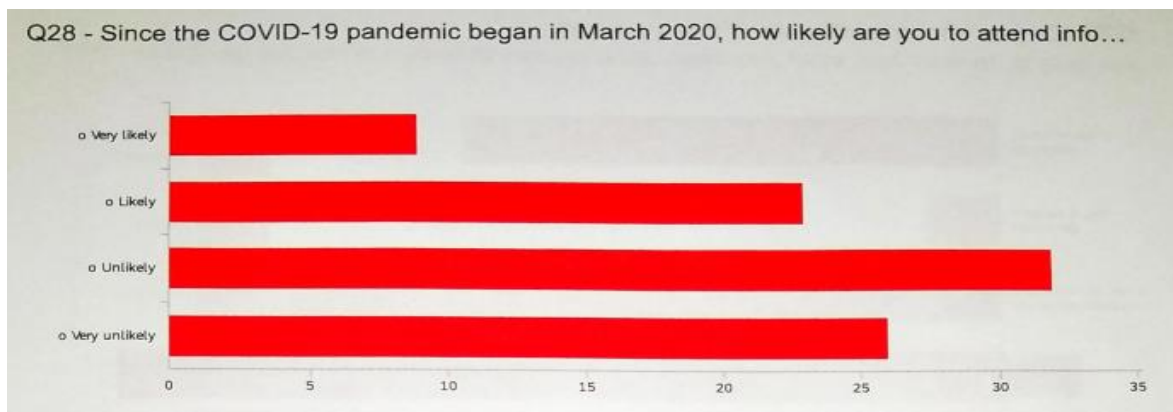


Figure 3. Graph presenting likeliness of participants to attend informal gatherings since March 2020.

Discussion

The results show that COVID-19 has had an impact on certain activities such as engaging with friends, while other activities remain unaffected. Majority of the results came from Juniors and Seniors. Participants were asked to take into consideration how the pandemic has affected their lives while answering these questions. Based on the results, it seems that the pandemic has affected individuals hanging out with their friends as they are being more cautious since the pandemic began, however, COVID-19 has not deterred individuals from interacting in intimate situations as 67.47% of the participants reported not taking any precautions before engaging intimately (kissing, making out, oral, vaginal, or anal sex). It is also reflected that 67.82% of participants have engaged intimately with someone in the past 30 days. It is fascinating that participants are taking more precautions when meeting friends than they are when engaging intimately. Research has shown that use of these dating apps has either risen or stayed the same despite the pandemic (Alpalhão & Filipe, 2020; Firkey et al., 2021; Jacob et al., 2020; Lopes et al., 2020). In comparison to the literature reviewed, the data reflected that individuals were less likely to use dating sites or apps to meet people during the pandemic, as only 21.31% of participants reported using dating sites/apps to meet people since March 2020. The data reflected an unwillingness to attend informal gatherings as 64.45% of participants indicated they were very unlikely or unlikely to attend.

These findings can be used to increase awareness of CDC and WHO guidelines regarding COVID-19 and sex among individuals on college campuses, integrate the CDC and WHO guidelines regarding COVID-19 on a basic level, teaching the

importance of wearing a mask, social distancing, washing hands, and having safe sex during the pandemic. Future researchers may be able to conduct prospective studies regarding COVID-19 and safety precautions taken at the college level perhaps branching into high school levels and performing this study on other college campuses to see how COVID-19 has affected their campus.

Limitations to the research is the study was conducted on one university in southeastern North Carolina, while the results are true for this university, these results may not be generalizable to all universities in the state or nation.

Conclusion

This project was successful in determining what precautions college students are or are not taking to stay safe during the pandemic. Based on the findings, this project helps in determining what education may be needed to bring awareness to the college campus regarding the importance of being cautious during the pandemic. Findings indicate that the pandemic has not discouraged students from engaging in intimate behaviors. Data analysis further supports the importance of education surrounding safety surrounding intimate behaviors during the pandemic.

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